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WASHINGTON POST  
26 April 1987

# North Drew Rodriguez Into Contra Operation

*Ex-CIA Operative Was Friend of Bush Aide*

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**A** Fired National Security Council aide Lt. Col. Oliver L. North secretly recruited a former CIA operative, Felix I. Rodriguez, in September 1985 to help coordinate aerial resupply missions to the Nicaraguan contras, according to informed sources and a letter signed by North.

North's recruitment of Rodriguez came at a time when Congress had barred direct military aid to the contras. The letter provides new evidence of North's efforts to assist the contras beyond details provided in the Tower commission report. It shows that North was deeply involved in air operations to supply the rebels at the time Robert C. McFarlane, then national security adviser, was telling Congress that his staff was not violating "the letter or spirit" of the law prohibiting such assistance.

**A** When recruited by North, Rodriguez was working at the Ilopango air base in El Salvador, advising the Salvadoran air force on fighting leftist insurgents. He had arrived there with strong recommendations from Donald P. Gregg, national security adviser to Vice President Bush and a former official of the Central Intelligence Agency. Gregg and Rodriguez had been friends since working together in Vietnam.

Gregg said in an interview that although they were friends, Rodriguez never mentioned his work with the contra resupply missions until August 1986, about a year after North recruited him.

Gregg, who said he had twice offered to resign because of concern that the controversy has hurt Bush politically, said that North "explicitly" ordered Rodriguez not to tell Gregg about the operation. "Felix is a trained intelligence officer. So am I. We believe in the need-to-know principle. I had no need to know," Gregg said. "It was not a subject we had ever talked about . . . . And I suspect that it smelled

bad to him and that he probably didn't want me to get involved in it."

According to a chronology released earlier by Bush's office, Rodriguez went to Gregg last Aug. 8 with concerns about the resupply organization and the poor quality of the airplanes being used. Gregg then convened a meeting in his office four days later to tell others in the government about Rodriguez's concerns.

The resupply missions came to public attention Oct. 5 when a plane carrying military equipment to the contras was downed in Nicaragua. When the plane went down, the first word of it to the White House came when Rodriguez called Gregg's deputy, Army Col. Sam Watson. After the crash, Gregg told reporters that he never talked with Rodriguez about the contras. Gregg now says that, at the time, he "forgot" about the August meeting with Rodriguez and that he later realized his statement was a "mistake."

According to the chronology, Rodriguez has met Bush three times, but Bush has said he and Rodriguez never discussed the contras. Gregg said he did not tell Bush of the August meetings because Rodriguez was complaining about corruption in the operation, which Gregg said he thought "was not vice presidential material."

"I thought I'd taken care of it," Gregg said. "I'm very glad in retrospect that I didn't tell him about it."

When Bush was asked Dec. 19 whether he was troubled about not being informed of Gregg's meeting with Rodriguez, he said, "Not in the least bit troubled." He added, "I was not running a secret operation out of the White House."

The role of the vice president and his aides is being examined by congressional investigators. The controversy remains a difficult one politically for Bush, whose standing as front-runner for the 1988 Republi-

can presidential nomination has been set back by questions about the contra activities as well as his role in the Iran arms sales decisions.

Gregg said he twice has offered to resign, not because he has done anything wrong, but out of concern that continuing attention to the issue has become a political problem for Bush. He said he offered to quit in December and again after Bush defended Gregg during an interview on the CBS News program "60 Minutes." Gregg said he again considered quitting recently, but after a "very painful period" he decided that "as long as the vice president is supportive of me, which he is, the best thing to do is tough this out."

"I have been and remain very confident that, the more that comes out, the clearer it will be that what we have said has been true," Gregg said.

Rodriguez, sometimes known as Max Gomez, has been unavailable for comment. He issued a written statement in Miami Jan. 2 saying he became "marginally involved" with the contra supply effort in late 1985, but providing few details.

Rodriguez, a Bay of Pigs veteran, was among a handful of Cubans working for the U.S. government in the 1967 Bolivian jungle manhunt that killed communist revolutionary Ernesto (Che) Guevara. In the early 1970s, he went to Vietnam, where, with Gregg, he devised a method for helicopter raids against guerrillas.

Rodriguez retired on disability from the CIA in the 1970s after a helicopter crash. Gregg said his old friend wanted to use methods they had devised in Vietnam to help fight the leftist insurgency in El Salvador, and he agreed to help. Gregg said he introduced Rodriguez to key U.S. policy-makers such as then-Assistant Secretary of State Langhorne Motley and others. Gregg said he "can't remember" whether he introduced Rodriguez to North but "Ollie got to Felix because of my relationship with Felix."

Continued

September 20, 1985

Dear Felix:

AFTER READING THIS LETTER PLEASE DESTROY IT. You may keep the photographs.

Within the next 15 days, the Unified Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) / Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN) air arm will commence operations with two new types of aircraft: the C-7, CARIBOU and the M-740, MAULE STOL (see enclosures). These aircraft will be used for air drop/aerial resupply to units inside Nicaragua.

Two contract C-7s are scheduled to arrive in Honduras on or about October 10. Initially the aircraft will be flown by U.S. citizens who are employees of the firm contracted to provide services for the FDN. It is intended that these and/or personnel primarily at night, performing paratroops to fly and/or personnel will be trained to fly guarantee discretion.

Please advise soonest as to proposal. If and agree, acceptance of this maintenance contractor will arrive and seek you out. He will identify himself as coming from Mr. Green.

Warm regards, hope all is well with you. We hear nothing but good reports about your work. Keep it up. Vaya con Dios!

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Rodriguez then went to Ilopango to help stage the helicopter raids. Gregg wrote a letter April 29, 1985, to Col. James Steele, U.S. Military Group Commander in El Salvador, praising Rodriguez after his first anti-insurgency operation in El Salvador. At the bottom of the letter, he penned, "Tell Felix not to take too many chances!" Steele maintained regular contact with members of the resupply operation, according to crew members.

According to one source, that summer North needed a new air base from which to stage resupply missions for the contras. The Tower board found that by fall 1985, North was "actively engaged in private efforts to resupply the contras with lethal equipment."

On Sept. 12, 1985, McFarlane wrote then-Rep. Michael D. Barnes (D-Md.) that no NSC funds were being spent "which would have the effect of supporting directly or indirectly military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua." Eight days later, North wrote the letter to Rodriguez describing plans for night air drops to contra units "deep inside" Nicaragua.

North's letter asked Rodriguez to

help with servicing of two new types of aircraft the contras were to begin using, the C7 Caribou and the M740 Maule. "Since this is a completely compartmentalized operation, being handled by the resistance, you are the only person in the area who can set-up the servicing of these aircraft," North wrote.

He ordered Rodriguez not to tell the CIA station chief and others there of his activities for the contras. He also asked Rodriguez to destroy the letter, but said he could keep photos of the aircraft. A copy of the letter has been obtained by congressional investigators.

Rodriguez has told others that he later possessed one of the 15 encryption devices that North had obtained in early 1986 from the National Security Agency. The devices, first described in the Tower report, were used to send classified messages to North in Washington.

After the resupply missions were under way, Rodriguez became dissatisfied with others North recruited, saying they were "going to take the money and run," Gregg recalled. He quoted Rodriguez as saying the others were "inept and nonprofessional and corrupt." Earlier reports have indicated there was mutual distrust between Rodriguez and others in the operation.

According to Gregg, Rodriguez came to him in August with these concerns—and his fear that a plane would crash. Gregg said he passed the concerns along to U.S. officials, including a CIA official, in the Aug. 12 meeting.

Gregg said he was not concerned then that the resupply missions were illegal. "The only illegality or the only unpleasant smell about what Felix had was that there were corrupt, inept guys who were ripping off whatever operation it was they were involved in," he said.

Gregg said he never learned how Rodriguez was paid, but said it was not by the United States or El Salvador. "He knows a lot of rich people in Miami," Gregg said, describing them as part of the "Cuban anti-Castro network."

Gregg said Rodriguez told him only in December that North had secretly recruited him. Gregg said he had drafted a letter to the editor of The Washington Post recently describing North's link to Rodriguez, but then deleted that portion from the letter he sent.

Staff researcher Michelle Hall contributed to this report.